

Violent assaults

NHS staff in Scotland survey 2022

This Violence at Work survey was sent to all health boards in Scotland under the Freedom of Information legislation. It is the first survey of its kind since the Coronavirus pandemic.

Since 2006, UNISON Scotland has carried out an annual survey of assaults to public sector workers by issuing a Freedom of Information (Fol) request to all employers of UNISON members in the public sector.

Our Fol request asks for details on the number of assaults on workers during the past year, broken down by job title or department and nature of assault.

We have reports from 18 health boards, 4 reported no incidents or failed to report. Over the years the quality of reports varies considerably and that remains the case in this year's survey.

We rely heavily on employers working with us to provide information in a usable form.

Aims of Survey

UNISON uses this survey for its campaign, bargaining and organising work. We use it to highlight assaults against health workers and improve the protection of staff. The survey has five broad aims:

- Reduce violence against workers
- Pressure employers to do more to protect workers
- Ensure incidents are recorded
- Improve employee reporting procedures
- Improve employer reporting process

Methodology

This year's survey was carried out from July to September 2022 by e-mail.

The survey asks employers to tell us the total number of assaults which have been reported in the latest year for which they have information, between 1 April 2021 to 31st March 2022.

Fol request asks three questions:

1. the total number of violent incidents on your staff broken down by job title/category of worker
2. a breakdown of the nature of the violent incident e.g., verbal, physical, threatening behaviour
3. How many violent incidents have been reported under RIDDOR Regulations (Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013) with a breakdown by job title/category of worker

Coronavirus pandemic

We have carried out a violence at work report every year since 2006, except during the Coronavirus pandemic 2020 and 2021 – for obvious reasons. Since this is the first report in three years, we do not use year on year comparisons.

Special Health Boards figures have increased from 438 to 832 assaults. This is because there are significant increases in reported incidents from NHS24 and State Hospital. This is because there have been improvements in reporting over the last 3 years – and therefore - it is not statistically relevant to make year-on-year comparisons with 2019.

In previous years where an employer has failed to provide a response and to recognise that many employers use different year ends we used their most recent figures to include in the aggregate totals. Again the pandemic years have made this difficult.

Once we build up a few more years of results we will be able to compare trends with pre-pandemic results and use aggregates over a range of years.

Headlines from NHS staff survey

- 18,389 assaults on NHS staff in Scotland
- 7,557 reported incidents in area health boards and 832 in special health boards
- We have reports from 18 health boards, 4 reported no incidents or failed to report
- Glasgow and Clyde Health Board reported 4949 the highest figure – it is the largest health board.
- Forth Valley Health Board did not respond

Threats and Assaults on staff

One assault on a worker who is providing a valuable public service is one assault too many. This would be the case whether the assault was reported or not.

To some extent the increase in reported assaults over the past decade has been the result of campaigning led by UNISON to have violence at work taken seriously by employers as well as staff and the public.

The improvements in reporting over the past decade have at least been partly due to this series of reports. It has improved awareness, and improved reporting procedures by employers – and made it easier for workers to report incidents.

We believe, however, that there are many incidents which remain hidden. Anecdotal evidence suggests this. But there are considerable differences in figures between

NHS employers for which low figures and poor information suggests we still face a good deal of under-reporting.

These issues are not unique to NHS boards. They are across the public sector.

NHS Territorial Health Boards

The aggregate figure for violent incidents in the territorial health boards is 17557. Before the pandemic we saw a fall in reports to 14,500. So, this is similar figures to for 2017.

NHS Area Health Board	Total
NHS Ayrshire and Arran	1,365
NHS Borders	1,035
NHS Dumfries and Galloway	150
NHS Fife	1,871
NHS Forth Valley	0
NHS Grampian	1,383
NHS Glasgow and Clyde	4,949
NHS Highland	1,496
NHS Lanarkshire	1,173
NHS Lothian	1,414
NHS Orkney	27
NHS Shetland	27
NHS Tayside	2,636
NHS Western Isles	31
TOTAL	17,557

NHS Special Health Boards

An aggregate total of 832 incidents was reported by the Special Health Boards in 2022. The 306 reported assaults on Scottish Ambulance Service staff account for 37% of the total. The State Hospital accounts for 31% of the total, while NHS 24 accounts for 30%. Of eight special health boards 3 did not provide a response or responded nil

NHS special health boards	Total
NHS Education for Scotland	0
NHS Health Scotland	0
Golden Jubilee	18
NHS 24	248
Scotland Ambulance	306
State Hospital	258
NHS National Services	2
Healthcare Improvement Scotland	0
TOTAL	832

Scottish Ambulance Service

The type or nature of the assault as well as the number of assaults help us understand the experience of those working in NHS jobs. The Scottish Ambulance survey reported 306 violent incidents, constituting a small part of the total annual number of violent assaults for NHS Scotland.

However, when you examine the nature of what is reported you can see a concerning picture:

- Aggravated Assault (by intent to Kill - with Firearm/Knife) 3
- Clinical Assault e.g. Struck by fitting patient 18
- Common Law Intent (Spit, Punch, Kick) 112
- Hate Crime (Race/Religion/Disability/Sexual Orientation/Transgender) 10
- Indirect Assault (Hit by closing door with intent to harm) 6
- Menace (Threatening staff with knife, bottle, within 6 feet) 17
- Provocation (Insulting words or provocation) 128
- Sexual Assault 6
- Threats and Extortion (Threatening to kill or torch a property) 6

Conclusion

NHS staff should expect a safe and secure workplace. NHS board's have a duty to do their utmost to prevent staff from being assaulted in the course of their work. NHS boards should take a positive zero tolerance approach towards tackling the problem of violence at work.

1. NHS Boards must manage violence and aggression risks and implement control measures. They need to increase on site security, and report all incidents to police.
2. The NHS has a staffing crisis and longest waiting lists since devolution. Adequate staffing levels is vital. The NHS is chronically under staffed. This is a cause of assaults against staff, it also means staff have no time to report incidents.
3. We need to reduce patient waiting and queuing times. The public have high expectations of their NHS and whilst it is not an excuse there needs to be a recognition that unreasonable waits and queues promote unreasonable behaviour.
4. Staff need trained in violence detection and management, including complaint and grievance handling, and de-escalation techniques, and options to help prevent a situation escalating
5. NHS staff need time to report and to trust reporting processes. NHS staff have little trust in the current DATIX system. To prevent further incidents it's crucial to ask employees to report, share their experiences and lessons and to give feedback and get support.
6. Dynamic risk assessments for violence and aggression. This is a continuous process of identifying hazards, assessing risks and taking action to eliminate or reduce risk while carrying out associated tasks. This means you can train employees to recognise the potential for aggression and remove themselves from the danger before it occurs.
7. NHS boards need to set realistic targets to improve reporting, build staff trust and reduce incidents.